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### NF01-488 Creating a Strong Family: Quality Time in Great Quantity

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## Creating a Strong Family Quality Time in Great Quantity

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*By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development*

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Societies are often fueled by the platitude, which can be defined as conventional, hackneyed wisdom packaged for general consumption. This common sense created for common living is called upon so often in day-to-day speech that we sometimes fail to recognize it for what it often really is:

Foolishness.

The utterance quality time stands out as one of America's great cultural platitudes. We mouth it endlessly, praying for short shrift as we run away from the need to invest considerable and genuine amounts of time with our loved ones:

"Though I only get 10 minutes with him every few days, I feel good about it because it's genuine quality time."

or

"I'm so very busy," we rationalize. "But I'm going to spend real quality time with her next week."

And so forth.

Our quest to create an absolutely busy life for ourselves and our children is a continuing puzzlement to me. Are we just simply hooked on our own adrenalin and need a fix by endlessly scurrying around? Has our competitiveness gotten out of control and we can't stop comparing ourselves to each other and rushing to keep up? Are our lives so genuinely meaningless in a consumption-driven society that we deny the emptiness and mask it with movement? Can motion be a substitute for meaning in life? Is all this simply the result of hype created by advertisers frantic to peddle their wares, and can rational human beings resist it?

I can't answer these questions very well but frankly, I believe that most likely people tend to develop their priorities in life based precisely on what they enjoy doing. It's not as if life forces us consistently

down roads we don't want to go. We may thoroughly enjoy being busy in life, but there is a downside to all this. It's what one minister I know aptly defines as:

the violence of busy-ness.

She means that this national pastime may result in increased productivity, but the toll it takes on the individual human spirit and on family relationships can be considerable.

Where did the term *quality time* come from? How did it find its happy home in American society today? I don't know for sure, but until a language specialist tells me differently, I'm going to wager that it became especially popular in the mid-1970s as the wave of the feminist movement gathered momentum. Feminist thinking has had a tremendously positive influence on my own life, so I'm not being critical here in the slightest. But as women moved into the workforce in increasing numbers, the stress of balancing multiple roles increased, and the search began for how women could somehow "have it all."

We're not at all confident today that anyone can "have it all," whether they are female or male. With the benefit of hindsight, we can look back and see how genuinely challenging it all can be and now know that a lot of corners are going to have to be cut if one really wants to try to win, win, win at everything. But 25 years ago the search began in earnest to find ways to have a successful career, a happy marriage, raise great kids, and maintain physical and emotional health without missing a beat. This was the game plan not only for women but men, also, and somehow if we simply shared roles and split the tasks down the middle, it would all be simple.

The mass media rose to the occasion with wonderful, jingoistic songs that perhaps seem a bit quaint today: "I am woman! Hear me roar!" and "I'm a woman, W-O-M-A-N." The songs made it very clear that women could do it all. Music encouraging men to become better fathers and do half of the child care and half of the housework - if it was ever created - didn't get any airplay. Such thoughts were clearly a hard sell to men.

Authors during this period responded with piles of books on how to become a master of the universe. One I found especially curious at the time gave advice on how to be a "one-minute parent." This approach seemed to typify the genre, and we still are living in this age today. One mother I know protested that it actually was a very useful book for parents, which I can neither confirm nor deny since I found the title so distasteful that I never read the book. The title alone symbolizes the excesses of the Age of Quality Time, in which we somehow have gotten ourselves convinced that excellence and speed go easily together, and both have religious significance.

But think on this a second (since we've got to hurry along with this column): Would you say to your boss, "I can't be here much the next six months, but I'll give you quality time." If you did say this, the boss would die laughing as you were ushered out the door. Or, would you be interested in discussing your imminent operation with a doctor who had a copy of "The One-Minute Brain Surgeon" on his desk?

Good things, indeed, take time. Lots of time. Why should a strong family be easy to create, when it takes decades to master golf or photography? Why do we talk about quality time when we're talking about loved ones, but we don't use the term in any other context?

Our friend Jeanette Coufal, a family specialist in Lexington, Ky., has successfully balanced marriage, family and career for more than 30 years. As she notes, the key to her strong family has clearly been quality time. And in great quantity.

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